

## Review Essay: After the Arab Spring

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W. Andrew Terrill

In a speech delivered on 19 May 2011, President Obama identified the following US “core interests” in the Middle East: (1) “countering terrorism,” (2) “stopping the spread of nuclear weapons,” (3) “securing the free flow of commerce and safeguarding the security of the region,” and, (4) “standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.”<sup>1</sup> The US military and intelligence presence in this region are designed to support these objectives and to reassure US allies while deterring potential adversaries such as Iran. Currently, it is not clear if the changes brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings will require the US military to find new ways to protect these interests or what adjustments to US basing and other military activity may be required. The ongoing civil war in Syria and the still unfolding political results in Arab nations that have successfully overthrown the despots that once ruled them add to the uncertainty. Understanding the development and evolution of the Arab Spring is, therefore, an important prerequisite for addressing some key aspects involving future US national security requirements. Fortunately, there are a number of excellent works on the subject that can be useful for US Army professionals and others seeking to do so.

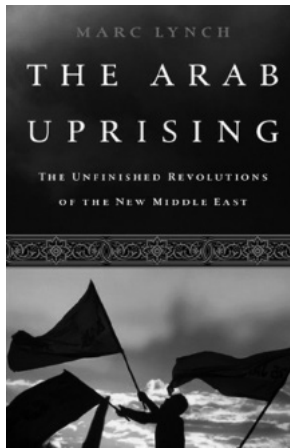
In examining these books, this essay seeks to help address an ongoing concern of US Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno, who in March 2012 stated, “We have learned many lessons over the last 10 years, but one of the most compelling is that—whether you are working among citizens of a country, or working with their governments or Armed Forces—nothing is as important to your long term success as understanding the prevailing culture and values.”<sup>2</sup> Tremendous insight into these cultural issues and values can be gained by examining the history, and especially the recent history, of the countries we view as partners and also those we view as potential adversaries. At this time, it is particularly important to consider the goals and aspirations of the Arab publics that participated in the Arab Spring and to find ways in which the US national interest can be advanced while respecting the concerns and values of Arab populations. To be engaged partners, US Army personnel must be informed partners, and the Arab uprisings are perhaps the most important set of events to occur in this region since at least the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Moreover, a strong understanding of the regional trends will help US Army leaders provide valuable and relevant advice to the civilian leadership on when and how the use of landpower options is a reasonable idea and when it may be especially problematic.

W. Andrew Terrill is the Strategic Studies Institute's Middle East specialist. He served with the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and US Air War College. Dr. Terrill has published in numerous academic journals on a wide range of topics, including nuclear proliferation. He has participated in the Middle Eastern Track 2 talks, part of the Middle East Peace Process.

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1 Office of the White House Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

2 General Ray Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army, “Regionally Aligned Force: A New Model for Building Partnerships,” *Army Live: Official Blog of the United States Army*, March 22, 2012.



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\$15.99.

## How the Arab Uprisings Developed, Succeeded, and Sometimes Failed

One of the most important studies addressing recent events in the Middle East is *The Arab Uprising* by Marc Lynch. This work presents an interesting and insightful overview of the Arab uprisings which began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to a number of other Arab states. Lynch examines the origins and development of these uprisings with special attention given to how the actions in various countries influenced other Arab states. Lynch views the Arab uprisings beginning with Tunisia as part of a process evolving regionwide and defines the Arab Spring as the span of time in which that process began and moved forward. While Lynch speaks of a unified narrative among protestors, he does not overgeneralize and is careful to highlight the differences among the numerous countries involved with the Arab uprisings. As an expert in Arab media, Lynch also examines the ways citizens were able to access information and coordinate protest activities. In doing this, he avoids the trap of viewing these struggles as the result of social media, which he instead treats as an enabling technology. In examining the role of technology, he remains alert to the possibility that activists using social media may not be good representatives of the mainstream of their societies. Lynch is also attentive to the importance of the Pan-Arab media, with a special focus on the role of the Qatari-based al Jazeera television station in influencing the events of the Arab uprisings.

Lynch maintains the main reason people came out to demonstrate in authoritarian Arab countries after the Tunisian revolution was a newfound belief their actions could actually make a difference as had occurred in Tunisia. Other Arab publics were stunned when a 23-year-old police state was defeated in less than a month by an enraged public, and the Tunisian example strongly indicated such success was possible elsewhere. Lynch also notes improved communications and new sources of information frequently allowed the public of one state to identify with and applaud the actions of protestors in other states confronting and seeking to oust undemocratic regimes. Here the role of al Jazeera television appears to have been especially important. Al Jazeera's talk show guests overwhelmingly sympathized with the revolutionaries, and the station characterized the fall of Tunisia's Ben Ali as an "unmitigated good." As the effect of the Tunisia uprising became apparent, the increasingly worried Egyptian government jammed al Jazeera's signal, but the news of the Tunisian revolution was too big and exciting to minimize. Moreover, the Egyptian public had a number of pent-up grievances now moving to the fore including decades of corruption and repression. Lynch notes the *fait accompli* of the president's son Gamal Mubarak's expected succession to the presidency helped "galvanize unusual levels of popular outrage," since Gamal was broadly viewed as an unacceptable choice to lead the country.

Lynch also examines the importance of the US military role in maintaining “near-constant” dialogue with the Egyptian army, pressing it not to fire on unarmed demonstrators. This dialogue reinforced the army’s self-image as the protector of Egypt’s citizens rather than its oppressor. This viewpoint was already deeply ingrained since the Egyptian military is composed of a largely depoliticized professional officer corps, indoctrinated to help minimize the danger of a military coup. Correspondingly, and following the Tunisian example, the Egyptian military remained unwilling to move outside its traditional role to help the Mubarak regime survive. This restraint encouraged Egyptian demonstrators to act more assertively in demanding the end of the regime, sometimes using the slogan, “the army and the people are one hand.” Without military backing, Mubarak had only the hated security police and various paid thugs between his regime and the popular will. This situation led to the fall of his government in January 2011. While at least 840 protestors were killed in the Egyptian revolution, this number could have been much higher had the army backed the president, and the regime may then have limped along until a more radical solution was undertaken.

Lynch moves on to what he refers to as “the second phase of the Arab uprising.” This phase followed the quick and relatively easy ousters of long-standing dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. This new environment included much tougher problems faced by protestors including grinding struggles with security forces and failures to overturn unpopular governments. Some protest movements faded quickly due to government suppression. Others, in places like Bahrain and Yemen, became protracted struggles which sometimes appeared as stalemates in which the security forces and sometimes the army emerged as tough adversaries against revolutionary forces. States with access to wealth also fared differently. Oman, for example, experienced the largest demonstrations of its modern history but was able to calm the situation with the aid of money provided by the richest of the Gulf Arab states.

The third phase of the uprising began in March 2011, a point in time Lynch identifies as a high point of counterrevolution and the use of force. He considers Saudi Arabia as an important leader of the counterrevolution, although he also indicates that the scope and extent of this leadership has often been exaggerated. He further designates two March 2011 events as key pivot points from the second to the third phase of the Arab uprisings. These are the Saudi-led military intervention in Bahrain and the beginning of NATO operations against regime forces in Libya. Also in March 2011, Yemeni President Saleh sharply escalated violence against demonstrators seeking his ouster. This brutality was so severe it led to the fragmentation of Yemen’s army into pro-Saleh and pro-demonstrator camps that deployed against each other and occasionally engaged in armed skirmishing with casualties on both sides. In this stalemated environment, Yemen’s president Ali Abdullah Saleh was able to remain in office until early 2012 despite a prolonged struggle to remove him. Also in March 2011, the Syrian uprising began to catch fire in response to especially horrific regime bloodshed including violence directed at children in the southern town of Deraa.

Lynch calls Bahrain “the first great battlefield of counterrevolution.” He solidly identifies with the demonstrators and is aghast at the repressive measures employed by the Bahraini government and its Gulf

allies. Although generally pleased with the Obama administration's policies toward the Arab uprisings, he is unsparing in his criticism of US policy toward the Bahrain struggle. Yet, this anger is not solely directed against US policy. He also states that al Jazeera surrendered its previously heroic Arab Spring role by ignoring the Bahraini intervention in apparent response to the foreign policy priorities of the Qatari government, which views Bahrain as an ally. He calls the security campaign against Bahraini demonstrators the first clear cut victory for repression in the course of the Arab uprisings. Lynch does acknowledge that many Sunni Bahrainis truly believe the demonstrations were part of a larger Iranian plot, although he considers such beliefs totally unfounded. Turning to Libya, Lynch is more upbeat. He praises the remarkable Arab League consensus in favor of Western military intervention to help the Libyan people. He also states that the mostly united Arab opposition to the Syrian regime's brutal crackdown indicates a new norm whereby regimes would lose their region-wide legitimacy when they pushed forward to an unacceptable level of domestic violence.

Lynch comments extensively on US foreign policy in the Middle East throughout the work and especially at the end. Unsurprisingly, he sees strong reasons to avoid Americanizing Middle East problems with military interventions in pursuit of unclear goals. He does, however, see an occasional need for force and strongly agrees with the US-supported NATO intervention in Libya. In considering Libya, Lynch presents a strong case that intervention represented a low-cost/low-risk decision to prevent a bloodbath in Benghazi with virtually no downside. He is particularly unsparing of leftist critics of the Libyan intervention, whom he views as so hopelessly mired in anti-imperialist ideology they can no longer make the easy choice to avert a massacre at almost no cost. Conversely, Lynch also asserts that a quick US response to the Syrian uprising would have been "propaganda gold" for the Assad regime in its effort to blame the uprising on an American-Israeli plot. Indeed, strong US relations with Israel, which Lynch does not disagree with, would make it devilishly difficult for the United States to become deeply involved in Syria without appearing to be doing so on behalf of a larger pro-Israeli agenda. Without this intervention, Assad's efforts to blame foreign plots for the uprising have largely and correctly been dismissed as propaganda.

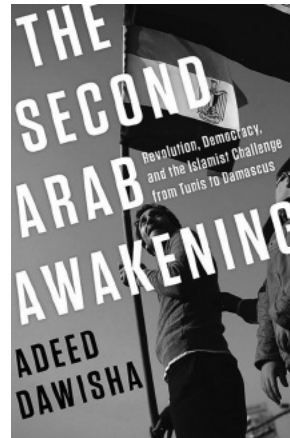
Consequently, if Lynch has any disagreement with the Obama administration it is not over Syria or Libya. He asserts the United States acted with reasonable speed and agility on giving support to Egyptian demonstrators seeking the fall of Mubarak (in a view that sometimes contrasts with the assertions of the Egyptian activists who maintain Obama was too slow). Rather, as noted, Lynch takes the strongest exception to the Obama administration's policy over Bahrain, which he often returns to throughout the book. Still, one wonders how strongly the United States should have asserted itself on this issue since Bahrain has less than a million citizens, and it is at least possible that many of the protestors' grievances might be partially addressed by aggressive antipoverty measures should the wealthy Arab states wisely choose to provide money for such projects. Furthermore, if the United States had a complete break with Bahrain, it would only lead to Manama's almost total dependence on Saudi Arabia, which would hardly improve the human rights situation there. Nevertheless, Lynch addresses objections such as these by

asserting that the United States' unwillingness to denounce the March intervention badly damaged its regional credibility by establishing a double standard for the actions of allied states as opposed to states such as Syria and Libya. Lynch is also worried about the changing narrative from populations struggling for freedom to sectarian populations fighting each other. Indeed, this problem already seems to be intensifying in Bahrain, Syria, and potentially Iraq.

### The Arab Uprisings in Context and Aftermath

An excellent companion volume for the Lynch work is Adee Dawisha's *The Second Arab Awakening*, which is the newest of the books considered in this essay. In this work, the author adds considerable perspective on how the Arab uprisings unfolded by placing them in a larger context beginning with the rise of Arab nationalist regimes in the 1950s and 1960s. He makes a case that many of these earlier regimes and their leaders started out well in efforts to address problems of social and economic justice, making strides in education, fighting illiteracy, and helping impoverished citizens improve their prospects for a better life. Yet these regimes also contained a tragic flaw because they were unwilling to open up the political system in any meaningful way. This lack of freedom festered in the Arab political psyche and became more troubling as once-promising nationalist regimes became increasingly self-serving, less interested in social and educational progress, and more grandiose, incompetent, and reckless in their decisionmaking. Regimes that had never been free managed to plunge their citizenry into deepening poverty and unmerciful exploitation by government officials, thereby undermining any social or economic justifications for continuing the dictatorships. As regime legitimacy declined, repression and public alienation in these states correspondingly increased, and some leaders, including Saddam Hussein and Hafez and Bashar Assad, descended into barbarism.

The Arab uprisings were one potential response to increasingly intolerable conditions in many states. Nevertheless, important as these uprisings have been, they are not universal in the Arab World, and some governments (particularly monarchies) may still be able to reform sufficiently or at least provide a decent enough life for their citizens to accept their continued rule. In considering the future, Dawisha also provides comprehensive analysis of the aftermath of the ouster of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes and the ways in which these countries have evolved since the end of their dictatorships including their potential for success. The electoral process in Tunisia including the role of political parties, campaigns, and voting outcomes are scrupulously analyzed with special emphasis on how the Islamist Ennahdha party was able to connect with the voters using a number of tactics including promises of moderation. Turning to Egypt, Dawisha examines a number of instances of conflict and confrontation between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces



New York: W. W. Norton & Company,  
2013. 288 pages. \$26.95.

(SCAF) and the activists who originally challenged the Mubarak regime. He then considers Egypt's elections which were characterized by the almost complete marginalization of the activists who led the uprising. Young people who brilliantly organized protests showed no interest in acting as political operatives contesting elections until much too late in the game. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, by contrast, built on years of organizational skills and long-standing relationships with key segments of the public, won both the parliamentary and presidential elections. Moreover, hard-line Islamists, known as *salafis*, finished in a strong second place in the race for parliament in a complicating factor for liberal policies and perhaps economic recovery.

Dawisha also considers Yemen and Libya where uprisings occurred, but the strongman was able to retain power for some time before he was ousted. Dawisha has strong praise for the Libyan opposition leaders who led the effort against the Qadhafi dictatorship and were able to assemble a coherent opposition leadership structure in the Transitional National Council (TNC). The TNC was able to coordinate the political, economic, and military support revolutionary forces received from a number of countries and present a reasonable and mature face of the Libyan Revolution to the outside world. Dawisha also agrees with Lynch that without NATO intervention, the revolution would have been crushed by heavily-armed government forces in a bloodbath directed against anti-Qadhafi rebels and probably anyone else in areas controlled by anti-government forces. As the war turned around, Qadhafi broadcast increasingly hysterical radio rants that could hardly have bolstered the morale of his supporters. When his forces were defeated and he was summarily killed, the TNC then faced the challenge of organizing a government in a country with at least 40 large and powerful militias that had participated in the destruction of the old regime but were not usually willing to give up much of their power. Under these conditions, and without any strong government institutions, Libya had an urgent need for elections to fortify a new national government. When these elections occurred, the Islamists did surprisingly poorly. While huge problems with order and stability remain in Libya, Dawisha suggests that its small population, great wealth, and commitment to "finishing the job properly," may give Libya at least some chance of becoming a peaceful, prosperous state.

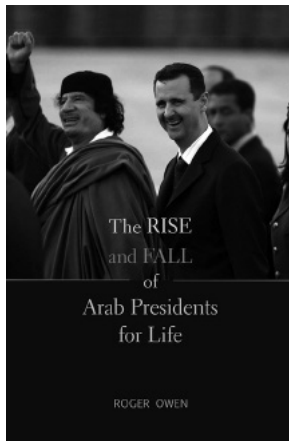
Dawisha further indicates Yemen faces tremendous problems as it recovers from a president who remained in power for 33 years without doing much for the country. Throughout his time in office, President Saleh engaged in both force and extensive political maneuvering to stay in power, although he was ultimately unable to do so. Unfortunately, Yemen could not easily afford the final power struggle, which lasted for over a year and ravaged the already weak economy. Yemen now faces both deepening poverty and intensified regional tension between the central government and the northern and southern regions of the country. It will, correspondingly, need intense international help to remain a politically viable state.

While Yemen's revolutionaries eventually removed that country's strongman from office, other examples Dawisha considers in this work include countries where uprisings occurred but were either co-opted, crushed, or fizzled out. Like Lynch, Dawisha worries that the Bahraini

crackdown has deeply discredited Shi'ite moderates who had been able to work with the king, making reconciliation appear as a distant dream. He also quotes the fact-finding commission led by American international lawyer and scholar Cherif Bassiouni that there was no compelling evidence linking Iran to the unrest in Bahrain. Dawisha, like Lynch, nevertheless notes that Bahraini Sunnis are convinced of this link. He shows little optimism for Bahrain predicting that the schisms there will become even deeper and more entrenched without intense and serious attention to Shi'ite grievances.

Dawisha is also deeply concerned about Syria, where civil war has now been raging for over 2 years. This portion of the book is not pleasant reading due to his vivid description of the measures the regime has taken to remain in power. Dawisha notes that Assad, like Qadhafi, has no compunction about butchering his own people. Unlike Qadhafi, he also has the means to do so on a much larger scale. Dawisha quotes a number of witnesses to the fighting who make some truly chilling statements. One Western reporter smuggled into the country is quoted as saying, "There are no targets. It's a pure systematic slaughter of a civilian population." Other witnesses include medical professionals from international organizations and "citizen journalists" who have sent reports of their plight often with video footage to the outside world. Dawisha describes the plight of the destruction of the Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr as particularly poignant. Baba Amr was considered an important rebel stronghold by the Assad regime, which singled it out for special punishment with intense shelling and bombing followed by house to house advances by government troops in which thousands of civilians were slaughtered. Baba Amr had a population of around 50,000 people before the rebellion, but it was reduced to a depopulated wasteland by these regime actions.

Turning to the governments that have survived the Arab Spring, Dawisha maintains the monarchies of both Morocco and Jordan had enough legitimacy to convince significant portions of their publics that these systems can be reformed from within. Dawisha has some particularly interesting insights on Morocco where the reasonably popular King Mohammad VI managed to preempt a revolution by undertaking what at least for now appears to be promising change. In Jordan, similar efforts to open the political system are also occurring, although they are less dramatic and more gradual. Dawisha also discusses Lebanon and Iraq. He suggests that the Iraqi public has shown increasing political maturity over time in a series of elections. In particular, Dawisha maintains many Iraqis want a more nonsectarian government and have been moving toward less divisive candidates in successive elections. Unfortunately, he cannot be optimistic about Iraq due to the polarizing and increasingly authoritarian government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki as well as the development of a timid and ineffectual parliament. Dawish also notes the Lebanese political system, despite numerous shortcomings, is far from the suffocating authoritarianism found in many other Arab states. He states all of Lebanon's major political factions and parties, including Hezbollah, are struggling to prevent the Syrian civil war from spilling over into Lebanon.



Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 248 pages. \$24.95.

## Chief Losers of the Arab Spring: The Arab Presidents for Life

In another useful book, Harvard's Roger Owen considers the Arab uprisings by dissecting the types of regime challenged, and in some cases overthrown, in the Arab Spring. It is hardly secret that the Arab world has historically been filled with undemocratic governments, but Owen highlights subtle changes in how these dictatorships have organized themselves over time. In the post-World War II era, monarchs and revolutionary autocrats dominated the region, although the strategies for maintaining these regimes in power were continuously adjusted through trial and error. Many of

these early "republics" were established by military coups, and they remained vulnerable to being overthrown by new cliques of ambitious officers leading some Arab states to become chronically unstable and coup-ridden. This system eventually changed with new and often more powerful strongmen and with the development of what Owen calls the Arab "presidential security regime," which came to dominate a number of Arab states and carry the process of nonmonarchical autocracy to a new level of presidential dominance. Owen traces the history of how these systems of military autocrats evolved into presidential security regimes by considering the examples of a number of Arab countries that have developed largely coup-proof regimes. Various dictators have accomplished this through tools such as parallel armed forces, multiple and competing internal security forces, sham elections, and expanded cults of personality, which in more recent times can include the leader's family. Once Arab rulers have foreclosed the possibility of losing power to a new coup by rising military officers, the temptation to establish oneself as president for life often seems irresistible.

Owen also states that Arab leaders have learned from each other's systems of regime maintenance causing monarchies to borrow the legitimizing institutions of the revolutionary republics such as weak or even rubber-stamp parliaments. Also, over time, the self-described republican states have in many instances acquired key elements of monarchy. Two of the monarchical features that are most interesting to the presidents for life have been: (1) the establishment of a ruling dynasty, and (2) the previously noted expectation that the president will rule as long as he is physically able to do so. The concept of a republican president for life who then passes power to a favored son while viewing neighboring monarchies with condescension clearly seems a bit odd. It took considerable time to reach this point since some strong Arab presidents retained at least the vestiges of republican principles for years after taking power. Many powerful Arab strongmen, such as Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba, probably expected to hold office indefinitely, but these leaders never seemed to have considered their sons might succeed them. More recently, emulating key aspects of the monarchies

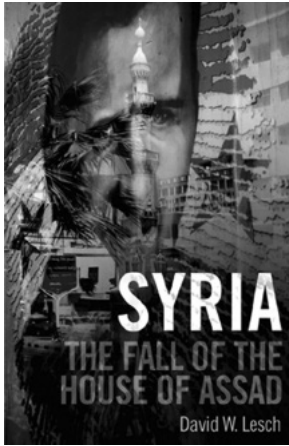


has often been poorly received by the public of these states, which often consider themselves to be part of more politically developed systems. Yet, on the eve of the Arab uprisings, father/son succession had already occurred in Syria and seemed to have been planned or at least considered by the presidents of Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Saddam Hussein also seemed intent on having his younger son Qusay eventually succeed him, but any steps in this direction became moot when he was removed from power by the US-led invasion in 2003. Some presidents for life who do not have sons who could succeed them have turned to other relatives. In Algeria, President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's younger brother was, at least for awhile, the front-runner to take power when the current president leaves office. In Tunisia, former president Ben Ali's son-in-law seemed to be carving out a role as heir apparent until the events of 2010-2011 swept the regime away.

Owen also contrasts the presidential security regimes with other systems of government in the Middle East. In doing this, he suggests reasons why Lebanon and post-Saddam Iraq have not developed presidents for life. He maintains that, in these cases, there is a diffusion of influence throughout their respective political systems that makes it difficult for a president to accumulate the kind of authority found in security regimes. This analysis clearly has relevance for Lebanon, although in the case of Iraq one needs to be more careful about drawing premature conclusions concerning the still-evolving political systems there. Turning to the monarchies, he suggests some of these states have adopted features of the presidential security regime beyond simply maintaining a king who is the functional equivalent of a president for life, albeit with a more straightforward form of legitimacy and none of the staggering level of hypocrisy of the presidential security regimes. Still, Owen stresses monarchical legitimacy is often too weak to guarantee the survival of any government without strong security institutions as well. Other regime maintenance strategies borrowed from the republics included managed elections for those countries with elected parliaments and large and powerful domestic security establishments. One cannot help noticing that, whatever their shortcomings, the Arab monarchs have done a much better job of maintaining themselves in power than the presidents for life. The Bahraini monarchy came the closest to collapse, but its fortunes dramatically changed following Saudi-led military intervention.

Owen contends the Middle Eastern uprisings have now largely ended the era of the Arab presidents for life, with only Syria having a limited chance of maintaining such a system. He maintains the era ended with "an almost complete rejection of this form of semimonarchical government" by "populations no longer able to stomach either the personal sense of humiliation this method of rule involved or the way in which it alienated them from their fellow citizens." Owen, like Dawisha, strongly asserts the systems of Arab presidents for life did little to compensate people for their existence under brutal repression. No sterling economic achievements stand to justify the leader's time in office in any of these countries. Corruption flourishes, unemployment, and especially youth unemployment, are astronomical, and collapsing or underfunded educational systems challenge the future leaders of these states. The ugly legacy of the presidents for life, therefore, remain for

future governments to address in what can only be seen as a herculean struggle where a positive outcome is by no means guaranteed.



New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 275 pages. \$28.00.

### The Ongoing Nightmare in Syria

Moving from the entire region to an extremely important case study, longtime Syria watcher, David Lesch has made a valuable contribution to the literature on the Arab uprisings by examining what is probably the most heartbreaking and complicated country experiencing serious unrest and fighting. Unlike the relatively easy victories in Tunisia and Egypt, the struggle to rid Syria of its dictator has been long, miserable, and incredibly bloody. In late 2010 and early 2011, both the Damascus government and most informed observers considered Syria to be a stable country and unlikely to experience significant upheaval. Syrian officials arrogantly stated that the Arab Spring found fertile ground in Egypt

and Tunisia due to their governments' subservient relationship to the United States, their unwillingness to provide significant support to the Palestinians, and their rule by elderly, out-of-touch autocrats in contrast to the much younger Bashar. Left unstated was the repressive apparatus of the Syrian state which was significantly more brutal, comprehensive, and intimidating than those of Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, or even Libya. When the Arab Spring revolts first broke out, Assad felt comfortable enough with the situation to praise the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in the comfortable belief that they had no implications for his regime. Then things changed in ways the regime's leadership never expected.

Lesch has met with Bashar Assad on numerous occasions prior to the civil war as part of his ongoing research into Syrian politics. Partially based on this experience, Lesch maintains it "is almost certain that Bashar al-Assad was absolutely shocked when the uprisings in the Arab world started to seep into his country in March 2011" after earlier Syrian demonstrators had failed to gather any kind of critical mass of supporters in January and February. In a country with 70,000 security officials, and a program of systemically applying intimidation and preemptive fear, this seemed unbelievable. In asking how this could happen, Lesch explores the theme of citizens coping with arbitrary repression on a daily basis and presents a portrait of a police state where unflinching oppression is both casual and reflexive. Lesch notes that Syrians have consistently been forced to swallow the brutality of the regime, but sometimes a line is crossed and outrage gushes forth. Just such a transgression occurred in the southern city of Deraa when a number of school children were apprehended by security forces for writing anti-regime graffiti on various buildings. These children, possibly including some as young as 9, were beaten, imprisoned, and reportedly tortured for an offense any humane political system would have treated as childish mischief. Spontaneous demonstrations occurred over the brutalization of the Deraa school children with Syrian authorities responding with

virtually automatic violence as the crisis escalated and protests spread to other parts of the country. The Syrian leadership was caught off-guard by the rapidly increasing intensity of the protests and continued to make a police and military solution the centerpiece of the government response. Later, as it became clear that peaceful opposition could not defeat the Syrian regime, an armed opposition emerged, which obtained weapons wherever it could.

Assad's violent response to the initially peaceful uprising was characteristic of his regime. Afraid any loosening on the reins of power would lead to the beginning of a process of ending the political dominance of his minority Alawite sect, the president was prepared to offer little in the way of actual democratic reform. Instead, he offered cosmetic changes and endless propaganda about foreign hands guiding the opposition. Regarding foreign plots, Bashar is quoted as saying, "They will say that we believe in the conspiracy theory. In fact there is no conspiracy theory. There is a conspiracy." The alleged conspiracy was supposed to involve an effort to weaken and dismember Syria because it is "the last obstacle facing the Israeli plans." Such talk clearly indicated the regime's unwillingness to seek any kind of meaningful compromise and instead engage in an effort to demonize the opposition. Indeed, Lesch suggests the Syrian leadership may have believed the confused and vacillating efforts to compromise with the opposition led to the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes by showing weakness when resolve was needed.

Lesch also makes a number of important points about the resilience of the Syrian regime and the Syrian dictator's drive to stay in power seemingly at all costs. He states that Bashar has evolved into a much more confident and cynical leader over his almost eleven years in office prior to the outbreak of civil war. While Bashar was initially surrounded by powerful old-guard ministers when he took office in 2000, by 2011 his authority had been completely established. Lesch also notes that, "the Assads have skillfully played the minority card over the years" and in doing so have usually been able to guarantee at least a 20-30 percent loyal base of regime supporters. In this regard, it would surprise no one the Alawite community is largely in Assad's camp, but other minorities have some difficult choices in assessing what kind of government will best serve their interests. The Assads have been aware of these concerns and are portrayed by Lesch as reaching out to Syria's Druze and Kurdish communities in an effort to generate more internal support. More importantly in terms of numbers, the regime has consistently manipulated the insecurities of the over 2 million Syrian Christians about their possible future under a Sunni-dominated or perhaps even Islamist government. Although the Syrian regime has usually been skillful in such efforts, one has to wonder how much manipulation is really necessary after the terror unleashed against Iraq's Christians following the ouster of Saddam Hussein. The rise of the al Qaeda affiliated al Nusra Front within the Syrian opposition occurred after this book was published but certainly stands as another key factor terrifying Syria's Christians.

Lesch notes the Syrian regime's excessive and reflexive use of violence squandered opportunities to damp down the unrest. He also discusses the nature and development of the opposition including the local activists who have often worked within the framework of Local Coordination Committees. He notes that these local activists have made

considerable use of social media and the internet just as their counterparts did in Tunisia and Egypt. This activity has caused the regime to respond by creating a special unit of computer experts called the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA). Other sources are less certain the SEA is actually controlled by the regime, though all sources understand it is virulently pro-Assad.<sup>3</sup> Lesch, however, is almost certainly correct in that a centralized regime such as the one in Syria would seek to maintain direct control over its propaganda message. Moreover, the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring has been so prominent it seems impossible Assad (a self-described computer enthusiast) would delegate his strategy for defeating the online protesters to a band of loosely affiliated well-wishers.

Lesch also expertly delineates a number of compelling reasons to expect the Syrian regime will resist a future diplomatic settlement. These reasons include Assad's concern that a number of his closest collaborators, including his pitiless younger brother, Maher, may be subjected to revolutionary justice even if he escapes it. Bashar appears to believe he has a good chance of outlasting the opposition. The Syrian leader appears doubtful the United States and other Western powers will intervene in Syria with ground troops given the recent US experience in Iraq. Lesch suggests a key factor inhibiting Western intervention is the cost of rebuilding Syria, which will probably be greater than the cost of rebuilding Iraq since at least Iraq has substantial oil reserves. Additionally, this scenario for rebuilding assumes the civil war will actually end with the defeat of the regime, which Lesch acknowledges is by no means certain since the opposition is deeply divided and may be unable to maintain even a fragile unity once the regime is no longer a threat. Lesch thus describes an escalating conflict that has continued to escalate since the publication of his book. Bashar remains unwilling to make serious reform or to take steps toward actual power sharing. The regime will either fall or prevail, but it does not appear it will compromise. Given this situation, one hopes an updated edition of this book will be possible since the situation in Syria is changing rapidly and Lesch's insights will continue to be of tremendous value, including after the regime's probable fall.

## Conclusion

The full meaning of the Arab Spring is still unfolding. The complexity of the problems that exist in this part of the world defy easy solutions, but there are times when US involvement can play an important role in helping friendly states without Americanizing their conflicts. The professionalism shown by the Tunisian and Egyptian armies during peak times of crisis was clearly encouraged by their longstanding relationship with the US military as well as their willingness to listen to US Army officers who spoke to them as friends during the upheaval. It is also interesting that some Arab sensitivities about cooperation with the West can be set aside briefly in a time of crisis such as when the Arab League supported the establishment of a NATO-enforced no-fly zone in Libya. Such action should not be taken as a green light for all sorts of interventions, but it does indicate more potential for expanded US Army

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Fowler, "Who is the Syrian Electronic Army?" *BBC News*, April 25, 2013. [www.bbc.co.uk/world/news-middle-east](http://www.bbc.co.uk/world/news-middle-east), accessed April 25, 2013.

activities in some countries in times of urgent need. The current deployment of US Special Forces units and some headquarters personnel from the 1st Armored Division to Jordan to help prevent a widening of the Syrian civil war may be a useful example of how to support a regional ally. On a more limited scale, the US Army's efforts to help reorganize and train some units of the Yemeni army are clearly useful in supporting the country's efforts to recover from the scars of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 33-year rule.

All the books reviewed reveal the grinding attrition of the Syrian civil war, which is now in its third year. No feeling person can be without sympathy for the Syrian population, but increasing US involvement in this crisis could be foolhardy if good intentions are allowed to wish away the a full consideration of the potential problems of such action. President Assad has been unyielding in his insistence that the uprising against him is the result of foreign powers acting in the interests of the Israelis. While such assertions are absurd, this does not mean they cannot gain traction should the United States widen its involvement in ways that include ground troops. These propaganda tools will almost certainly not be confined to the Assad government but could also be taken up by Syrian Islamist radicals in the struggle for control in post-Assad Syria. Such reasoning is one indication that ground troops should be used in Syria under only the more dire circumstances and in ways that will not cause them to become bogged down so withdrawal is difficult later. The United States especially does not want to become an occupation force in such circumstances.

Above all, the Arab Spring and its aftermath should be viewed as a time of tremendous transition in the Middle East, where well-informed US Army leaders may be called upon to find ways to help friendly forces in useful and creative ways. In doing so, the US Army should seek to provide helpful options to the US civilian leadership in ways that offer reasonable rewards for wise rather than massive commitments.

